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ABSTRACT

The Assessment of Prior Learning Program at Humboldt State University, California, is described. The program enables students to gain at least token recognition, through elective units, for prior learning by taking a course and writing a portfolio that is assessed by faculty and awarded up to 10 additional units. The program began by offering lower-division credit under a Behavioral and Social Sciences course number, and is now offering upper-division credit in all academic areas. Through the Division of Interdisciplinary Studies, it is suggested that the entry of older students into the regular college population has resulted in more flexibility in the traditional curriculum. The faculty, by working with students who are in their same generation or older, have become more aware of the kinds of expectations they have of college students. One issue is whether people learn better by moving from the particular and applied to general principles, or vice versa. Courses are usually taught beginning with the general and then examining applications; however, adults who have considerable nonacademic experience are likely to learn in the other direction, using applied knowledge as the basis for theoretical understanding in academic courses. The average age of students in the program has been 42 years, and 90 percent have been women. Most people who enroll complete the course, but only about one-third complete the portfolio for the additional units. The greatest faculty concern has been to maintain a level of quality at least as high as in regular courses and to create credibility for the program with other faculty. A bibliography is appended. (SW)

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Assessment of Prior Learning: An Interdisciplinary Perspective[1]

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In 1977 a group of faculty in the School of Behavioral & Social Sciences at Humboldt State began the Assessment of Prior Learning Program, which has come to be known as the APL ("apple") Program. Two concerns created the impetus for the program: one, the growing number of older students who come to college with rich and varied experiences; and two, the need for better methods of evaluating the many forms of "field experience" courses on our campus, such as internships, independent study and student teaching.

Of these two concerns, only the first is addressed directly by the program. Students who are enrolled at Humboldt have been able to gain at least token recognition, through elective units, for prior learning by taking a course and writing a portfolio which is assessed by faculty members and awarded up to 10 additional units. The program began by offering lower-division credit under a Behavioral & Social Sciences course number, and is now offering upper-division credit in all academic areas, through the Division of Interdisciplinary Studies.

We had hoped to address the second concern, of providing an improved method of evaluating field experience, through offering our portfolio pro-

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cedure as a model to existing field experience courses and programs. We have invited faculty members involved in such programs to our workshops, and have continued to inform colleagues of our progress, but inroads have been made in an unexpected way. The Departments of Social Welfare and Education became interested in the portfolio, and have referred students to our course, so that their portfolios could be brought back to the departments as vehicles to challenge parts of field work and student teaching requirements for the respective majors.

Our Department of Psychology has no field experience requirement for the undergraduate major, so a similar application of the APL portfolio is not possible. Our graduate program in counseling requires some prior experience in the field, and includes field placements throughout the two-year program. However, the placements are closely supervised and are the basis for practicum sessions, so that challenging or waiving this part of the program seems to be out of the question at this time.

This situation is an excellent example of the limitations of prior learning programs, but is also a good starting point for a discussion of the possibilities for using prior learning in psychology programs. Faculty supervision <u>is</u> important, and any worthwhile program will attempt to direct students' learning according to the faculty's unique professional orientations. For most graduate, and many undergraduate, programs, this faculty control is an essential component. However, two questions can be raised: (1) is this control necessary in every facet of the program?; and (2) is there room for flexibility in the cases of some students who have unusual amounts of prior experience?

Some hidden assumptions underlie these questions. We have a tendency to assume, usually nonconsciously, that all academically relevant

learning can occur only in our classrooms. Actually, on reflection, I think we would find that some of the knowledge we want our students to have can be acquired anywhere, while other kinds of knowledge require our special imprint. It can be useful to make this distinction.

A second assumption is that college students are naive vessels waiting to be filled. The influx of older students into the regular college population has forced many of us to question this assumption, and has led us to opt for more flexibility in the traditional curriculum.

The most covert, and most malignant, assumption is that the better students have gone to college "on time" (as most faculty members have), so that older people who are in college must be less capable (Harrington, 1977). Many faculty members are reluctant to accept older students as a legitimate part of their teaching responsibility, and are not prepared to make the changes necessary to include this group in that responsibility.

Once we question these assumptions, we open ourselves to some unsettling considerations regarding our professorial roles and the nature of academic learning. Clearly, we need to move away from a conception of our role which depends on our being older than our students, with the quasi-parental implications.

In working with students who are as old or older than ourselves in the APL Program, and dealing with material that has already been experienced, we have been made more aware of the kinds of conceptualizations we expect from college students. For example, we try to help these students formulate their non-academic experiences in terms of general principles, moving from the particular to the general and back again, and analysis (posing questions and considering all possible answers). In a sense, we are asking them to do, in their portfolios,

what we and the textbooks do for them in conventional courses.

One interesting issue is whether people learn better by moving from the particular and applied to general principles, or by learning general principles and frameworks first and only then turning to the applications. Although both approaches can be useful, we almost invariably teach our courses in the latter direction, while adults with large amounts of non-academic experience are likely to learn in the other direction, using their applied knowledge as a basis for theoretical understanding in academic courses. This may be one reason why "re-entry" students get better-than-average" grades (Halfter, 1962; Harrington, 1977).

There is a growing literature on adult cognition and learning, which suggests that intellectual abilities do not necessarily decline with age (Kangas & Bradway, 1971; Gruber, 1973), and that the nature of adult cognition may differ from that of earlier stages (a good review of the literature is provided by Hooper & Sheehan, 1977). For example, Arlin (1975) has proposed a shift from "problem-solving" to "problem-finding." This literature, coupled with proposed applications to college teaching (e.g., Knowles, 1973; material from the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning CAEL), should be incorporated into our attempts to adapt the college experience to older students.

In the APL Program, the average age of students has been 42, and 90% of the participants have been women. These figures reflect the national pattern, in which older women are the fastest-growing group of college students. Most people who enroll complete the course, but only about 1/3 complete the portfolio for the additional units. One or more of three reasons seem to account for an individual's failure

to complete the portfolio: a lack of sufficient interest in or need for the extra units; the amount of work to complete the portfolio not anticipated by the student; and/or the inherent difficulties in doing independent work, which is harder to complete than regular class assignments, especially after the class sessions are finished. On the other hand, the completed portfolios have been of high quality, requiring, in some outstanding cases, little or no extra faculty assistance.

In keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of the program, two or more faculty members read each portfolio, and arrive at a consensus on the number of additional units to be awarded. Those of us who have worked in the program find that we are seldom more than two units apart in initial judgments, and almost always resolve the difference easily. A new assessor tends to base the initial judgment on some familiar model, e.g., the usual number of units assigned for a regular course or field work requirement, but can usually be convinced to break this set by reading other portfolios and discussing the non-traditional principles involved in the program. In spite of this relatively high "inter-rater reliability," we are still grappling with the important task of defining, in writing, the criteria and guidelines for the number of units to be assigned. I suspect that we retain the usual course unit limits as a background, and have in mind a model 10-unit portfolio as the upper limit.

The greatest faculty concern has been to maintain a level of quality at least as high as in regular courses, to satisfy our own standards, as well as to create credibility for the program with other faculty. We have been quite satisfied that, in terms of quantity of

work, quality of conceptualization, and amount of learning, the APL Program has maintained high levels of academic productivity and excellence. Ironically, it appears necessary for a person to understand and accept the revised assumptions mentioned earlier, in order to see the value of the APL portfolio. Thus, we still face a negative reaction from many colleagues on our traditional "young student" campus. Our sucess has been possible partly because the program has not attempted to apply prior learning principles in departmental majors, which is exactly what we are suggesting here.

Although the APL Program has not been used in our Department of Psychology, I believe that the approaches and principles developed there could be used to improve psychology programs, for both "traditional" and "non-traditional" students. Certain competencies that do not require our special attention could be acknowledged through department-sponsored course challenges. More interesting are the possibilities of making better use of prior learning in more complex and important areas. In my own department, the graduate program in couseling might profit from requiring a prior learning portfolio from entering students, to bring to the foreground their experiences and knowledge which can be linked directly to the academic program.

For example, a person who has volunteered as a lay counselor at Planned Parenthood could explore, in writing, some principles and problems of counseling that were apparent to her/him in that setting. This could be a starting point for the formal study of counseling techniques, and would make it easier to move beyond levels that are already mastered, and to concentrate on areas of weakness and correct misconceptions. This might be more productive than the general practice of

acknowledging previous experiences and then asking the student to "file and forget," through which some valuable things may be lost, and some erroneous approaches may not be examined.

Even a traditional curriculum can include recognition of prior learning. Such recognition can not only enhance the academic experience of non-traditional students, but also improve and broaden our academic programs through more appropriate utilization of learning possibilities.

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